

‘THE PUNCH’ PERCEPTION OF GERMANS, ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO-A CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

In Germany Kolonialverein, a society set up in 1882 used to campaign in support of colonial expansion. The British more than a century before the Germans had set their foot in foreign lands and had established colonies. But during the First World War, Britain came into direct confrontation with an enemy with similar aspirations. Invariably the media of that time in Britain picked up the issue and assiduously engaged in projecting the ‘enemy’, the Germans in the worst light possible.

The general approach of repudiation of the ‘Germans’ used to take the form of tossing lexical firecrackers in the face of the Germans. Of course, there were also those who perceived the events on the world stage as part of life’s compelling absurdity. ‘Punch or The London Charivari’, a British weekly magazine of satire and humour during the war years regularly featured the German war efforts. The target audience of the magazine were mostly literate and the cartoons for which Punch was famous in their caricatures, attempted to denigrate the Germans in general and the German army in particular.

The investigator attempted a physical examination and study of a collection of the Punch Magazine which is one hundred years old. The study revealed how the British imperialist mindset was in operation even in the British media. Reading the cartoons from the corridors of time present when Britain is no longer perceived as powerful like the US or the Chinese, reveals how the whole imperialistic enterprise was built on a false sense of perception of own superiority. This presentation which intends to display select cartoons will expose the irony of the British living under the illusion of being a powerful civilization at a time when the German leaders were secretly preparing a general theory of Aryan supremacy which ultimately led to the Second World War.

KEYWORDS: British, Cartoons, Germans, Imperialism, War

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“PUNCH” cartoon is not to be considered merely as a comic or satirical comment on the main occurrence or situation of the week, but as contemporary history for the use and information of future generations cast into amusing form for the entertainment of the present.

- M.H.Spielmann (1906).

INTRODUCTION

Many books on history contain cartoons and are often a kind of relief. (Douglas) Political cartoons appearing in newspapers are a kind of artistic vehicle, specially made for the purpose of conveying editorial commentary on politics, politicians and current events. (Britannica Online). For a student of history, the sources are important and political cartoons can be analyzed just as deeply as a written source. (Lopez-Menchero) In a monograph about a book on using Cartoons as historical evidence, Scully made an observation regarding its usefulness for those keen

on exploring visual representations of the past- it will appeal to readers interested in innovative ways of writing history. A site posting resources to study history made a similar observation: Though historians prefer textual material, non-textual materials such as cartoons, provide a wealth of information which help find answers to historical questions.(NCS Univ.)

BACKGROUND

It is officially accepted that thousands of Germans had migrated to Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Panayi quoting the 1911 census stated that 53,324 German immigrants resided in Britain and went on to observe that when the First World War broke out hostility towards Germans grew and it existed in relatively mild forms.(1) The Edinburgh Review 1909 described Anglo-German relations: 'Undoubtedly, one of the chief causes of estrangement is the Englishman's and the German's abysmal ignorance of one another'. According to the editor of The Outlook, the German Empire around 1900 was 'no longer the saturated power of Bismarck's post-bellum reassurances'. It had become an 'an unsated Power', 'a cause of intensifying anxiety and apprehension to all her neighbours' (Garvin 1906: 327; Alter 1995: 170).

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Written historical data that dwell on Britain's perception of Germany especially during the First World War is available in plenty. But the investigator found that perception of Germany found in popular magazines in Britain like 'The Punch or The London Charivari' is rare. This study intends to fill up the research gap.

OBJECTIVE

The main objective of the study is to identify the British perception of the Germans during the First World War that emerge in cartoons in 'The Punch'. The specific objective is to identify how the government, formed through democratically elected representatives of the people of Britain perceived the Germans in general and the German army in particular during the First World War.

METHOD

Working on the assumption that cartoons represent valid perceptions of people and events, this study attempts a critique of cartoons that appeared in the popular magazine, 'The Punch' during the First World War. The study of British perception of the Germans is undertaken by physical examination of cartoons in the back issues of the magazine which is one hundred years old.(2) For reviewing each cartoon, the investigator made use of the following questions as a guideline:

- Does the cartoon throw light on the British perception of Germans?
- What is the argument that the cartoonist is trying to make?
- *Does the cartoon have a clear message or agenda?
- *Is it possible to relate the event/incident/caricature to a historical event ?(historical inquiry)
- *What is the view point represented?
- * Does the cartoon highlight or contradict information provided by other textual or visual sources? (3)

FINDINGS

For ease in comparison and for drawing inferences, cartoons which have a similar theme or focus of perception, have been identified and classified under four different heads:

- Cartoons depicting sheer dislike of Germans
- Cartoons depicting the European perception of Germany
- Cartoons depicting German military strategy
- Cartoons depicting German leadership

The nine cartoons classified for the study are marked in alphabetical order A to I and have been included in the Appendix.

1. CARTOONS DEPICTING SHEER DISLIKE OF GERMANS

Cartoon - A

Date of publication: March 17, 1915

The full page cartoon depicts seven different ways of using a German helmet. The seven uses are illustrated with a fair degree of accuracy marking it out for the cartoonist's ability to intermingle art with humour. The seven drawings have been laid out with one in the centre and the rest in circular form. The intention appears to be to make fun of the clumsy looking helmet. But seldom do people realize that the German army helmet is a protection against sniper fire which can injure or kill someone during war. So, the cartoonist's intention of arousing humour indirectly applauds the design of the German helmet. Because at the end of the war, when army units are dismantled, even the simple helmet could be put to umpteen uses.

Cartoon - B

Date of publication : April 19, 1916

This is yet another full page cartoon depicting a man resembling Shakespeare holding in his hand the poster 'Shakespeare Centenary Festival, 1916'. The man is depicted as staring at a figure wearing a cloak with right hand held up with forefinger pointed skyward staring into the eyes of the man resembling Shakespeare. He also holds a huge book which he clasps close to his body with his right hand and appears to be saying something:

The caption for the cartoon reads:

THE REPUDIATION

MARTIN LUTHER (TO SHAKESPEARE): "I SEE MY COUNTRYMEN CLAIM YOU AS ONE OF THEM. YOU MAY THANK GOD THAT YOU'RE NOT THAT. THEY HAVE MADE MY WITTENBERG AY, AND ALL GERMANY-TO STINK IN MY NOSTRILS."

Martin Luther's (1483-1546) act of marching up the castle church in Wittenburg and nailing the 95 theses to the door has remained a lasting symbol of resistance for centuries. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is widely regarded as one of the greatest writers of the English language who lived at a time which saw the effect of Martin Luther's act which set the Reformation in motion. But recent biographers of Shakespeare have speculated that Shakespeare may have had Catholic loyalties which probably brought him into conflict with the escalating anti-Catholic campaign. (Spark Notes)

It is not clear whether the message is that Literature can have a greater impact than Religion which tends to divide

people. Probably the British assumed that the German establishment was ‘Repudiating’ or denying the truth or validity of the message of Shakespeare and was keen on dismantling such ideas.

2. Cartoons Depicting the European Perception of Germany

Cartoon - C

Date of publication : February 10, 1915

This is a full page cartoon depicting a man in military uniform seated with a dejected face pondering over something. He holds in his hand a banner on which is written ‘Hague Convention’. Beside him stands a lady figure staring at the man seated below with the left fingers clenched and the right hand raised as if to thrash the man. On her crown is written CIVILIZATION.

The Hague Conference of 1907 had renewed the declaration prohibiting the discharge of projectiles from balloons. But the declarations prohibiting asphyxiating gas and expanding bullets was not reaffirmed. The conference scheduled for 1915 did not take place owing to the outbreak of the First World War (Britannica)

Nine months after the outbreak of the First World War, the International Congress of Women was convened in The Hague, Netherlands, from April 28 to May 1, 1915. Two significant resolutions regarding women and war reads:

- *A “protest against the madness of war”, which had resulted in “reckless sacrifice of human life”.
- *Acknowledgement of the “odious wrongs” committed against women as a result of the war”.(Digital Chicago)

Given the fact that the Hague Conference scheduled for 1915 did not take place but a Women’s conference was held which denigrated the war, the cartoon’s reference appears to project the general feeling of ‘civilized’ nations’ dislike of Germany’s role in the war.

Cartoon - D

Date of publication : 1916

The half page cartoon from the collection of cartoons published under the title ‘Punch’s Almanack for 1916’ presents a soldier marching off after having handed over own weather proof coat to two grinning children treading through snow covered streets. One would have expected it to refer to the German army during the winter. But it is the title that distorts any linear sense making. It reads ‘TRUTH MIRRORED IN GERMAN ART’. This would naturally prompt one to read the caption which would in turn prompt one to cogitate on the historical truth.

The caption reads:

THE SENTRY’S SACRIFICE

GIVES OVERCOAT, TUNIC AND LUNCHEON TO BELGIAN LITTLE ONES GOING TO SCHOOL ON A WINTER MORN

(This chef d’oeuvre, by a Wertenburg artist, portrays the humanity of the Kaiser’s troops and has been substituted by the Imperial German Censor for a very offensive picture)

The historical fact is that when Germany declared war on France, Belgium refused to permit the Germans to cross over to France. But Germany invaded Belgium, killing civilians en masse.

Overlooking the neutral stance of Belgium and using it to cross over to France can in no way be justified by ‘acts’

of kindness such as the one the cartoon depicts. The cartoon dwells on the propaganda in operation during the war making it difficult even after almost one hundred years of the German invasion to make sense of the German treatment of Belgians.

3. Cartoons Depicting German Military Strategy

Cartoon - E

Date of publication : February 10, 1915

This single page cartoon depicts a German officer in military gear mounted on a camel appearing to engage in a conversation with the camel.

The caption reads:

THE RIDDLE OF THE SANDS

TURKISH CAMEL : "WHERE TO ?"

GERMAN OFFICER: "EGYPT"

CAMEL : "GUESS AGAIN."

The likelihood of getting lost in sandy deserts is something the ship of the desert, an animal like the camel knows. Perhaps the cartoonist is taking a dig at the ignorance of simple facts of life by the imperialist Germany military.

While the cartoonist elicits the reader's smile, on closer reading, it reveals the unstoppable German army and the German expansionist aspirations!

Cartoon - F

Date of publication: April 19, 1916

This is yet another full page cartoon depicting a German military officer with a smile beside a pig, tapping from behind a man dressed like a Moor or a Muslim. The man returns a disgusting stare at the officer. The drawing is not complex, but the caption is quite explosive in terms of war tactics. It reads:

LOVE ME, LOVE MY PIG.

(Captured documents show that the German Government had schemed to stamp out Mohammedanism in East Africa both by force and by the encouragement of pig breeding!

Though the veracity of the statement regarding 'captured documents' is difficult to be checked, one thing is certain that the British media, like 'The Punch' was terribly upset by the expansionist strategies employed by the Germans at a time Britain had successfully blockaded supplies along the North Sea to Germany.

Cartoon - G

Date of publication: 1916

This page from the 'Punch's Almanack for 1916' depicts an assortment of four cartoons on the same theme "THE GERMAN HUNT FOR METAL'. All the four cartoons have separate descriptions. But the cartoonist's ability to communicate the message through the humorous drawings makes the descriptions redundant. They read:

- ***CITIZEN HAVING HIS HEEL-TIPS REMOVED.**

- ***DOG’S IRON DRINKING-VESEL BEING COMMANDEERED.**
- ***CONFISCATING CHILD’S TIN TRUMPET BY IMPERIAL DECREE.**
- ***REMOVING ARTICLES OF METALLIC SUBSTANCE BY HIGH VELOCITY VACUUM PROCESS.**

One reason for the initial success of the German army during the first world war was owing to its powerful artillery. Military equipments needed ‘iron’. So even if the cartoons evoke a grin in the reader, the fact that the ‘iron’ being collected was shortly to turn to military equipment was an immediate possibility which the British feared.

4. Cartoons Depicting German Leadership

Cartoon - H

Date of publication: May 19, 1915

The full page depicts an ugly apparition depicting ‘death’ snatching the hand holding a glass of wine of a man seated on a chair in full military gear. In the background can be seen a pole raised with a noose meant for hanging. The caption reads:

WILFUL MURDER.

THE KAISER. : “TO THE DAY....’ DEATH : “...OF RECKONING

The historical reference is quite obvious. Only on May 7, 1915, a week before the publication of the cartoon, a German Navy U-boat torpedoed and sunk a UK-registered ocean liner, RMS Lusitania, the largest ship of the time. It was returning from New York, USA to Liverpool England when it was sunk off the British coast killing 1959 passengers including crew.(Britannica)

The sinking of the Lusitania stunned both the British and the Americans and the cartoon captures the feeling of the time. So it is only natural on the part of ‘the Punch’ to present a cartoon with the caption ‘WILFUL MURDER’. In fact, if cartoons are intended to alter public opinion this cartoon, more or less accentuates the feeling of the general public.

Cartoon - I

Date of publication: May 19, 1916

The single page cartoon depicts a young man in military attire seriously cogitating. On the armchair lies a newspaper with a bold heading: GREAT FEAT OF THE DEUTSCHLAND BREAKS UP THE BLOCKADE.

The caption reads:

OUT OF THE LIMELIGHT.

CROWN PRINCE (still before Verdun). “PEOPLE SEEM TO BE LOSING INTEREST IN MY EXPLOITS. I THINK I SHALL HAVE TO CARVE OUT A FRESH CAREER AS ONE

OF THESE SUBMARINE COMMERCIAL TRAVELLERS”.

During the First World war, the British established a blockade of Germany preventing cargo destined for Germany. As per the National archives of the UK, trade blockades had been a vital coercive element in the maintenance of British naval supremacy. This supremacy was still very much intact...the ‘hunger blockade’, a war of attrition that lasted

till Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles.

Perhaps the cartoonist was successfully conveying the historical fact that the naval blockade had 'torpedoed' the imperialist aspirations of Germany which the imaginary news headline presents.

LIMITATIONS

There is every possibility of an error to have crept in the attempt to relate the cartoons to historical incidents. There is also the likelihood that the cartoons may be opinion oriented which jeopardizes historical truth. Further, checking the accuracy of historical events after a century of the real incident, can not only be tedious but even faulty. This is because of the huge gap in time and space and of the ever changing cultural perspectives activated by the forces of globalization.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The accuracy of the interpretation of the cartoons can be cross checked with historical documents. A comparative study of cartoons, drawings, photographs and write-ups in magazines and newspapers of the period can also be done as attempted recently by the investigator. (Praveen,2021)

SUMMING UP

The study has shown how the cartoons chosen for critiquing makes direct reference to incidents in a fascinating way. But according to a post on 'Political cartoons' in a website, the element of fun is not the main purpose and they are created to persuade the audiences to take a particular view of historical events.(History Skills)

There is every possibility that in some of the cartoons chosen for study there are instances of exaggeration. But one cannot but admit that the cartoons, even as they entertain, reveals the typical mindset of the British Media represented by the popular magazine of the time, 'The Punch'. In general, they appear to have assumed that the British Army and Navy are superior and are a power to be reckoned with. At any rate, the cartoons have enabled us to stand on the corridors of time present and listen to voices of time past.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- It would be worthwhile to recall Hegel's perception of the British state as one controlled by society in the interest of particular industrial groups. According to Hegel objective liberty as the rule of reasonable law in England had been sacrificed for the rule of formal liberty and particular interests (Mommsen 1996: 221). This appears to anticipate Britain's image as a nation of shopkeepers, merchants and puritans, a society dominated by materialism, individual profit and hypocrisy, unable to respond adequately to the masses' interests and historically unable to found the state on an ethical basis.(Leonhard)
- **Punch or The London Charivari** is a British weekly magazine of humour and satire established in 1841. (Wikipedia) According to Altick (1997) within a year or two of its founding, it became a house hold name, beginning in the middle class and soon reaching the pinnacle of society, royalty itself.

- The method of analyzing the cartoons closely follows the steps suggested in the NSU website :1.Summarizing 2.Contextualizing 3.Infering 4.Monitoring 5.Corroborating.

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APPENDIX

1. Cartoons Depicting Sheer Dislike of the Germans

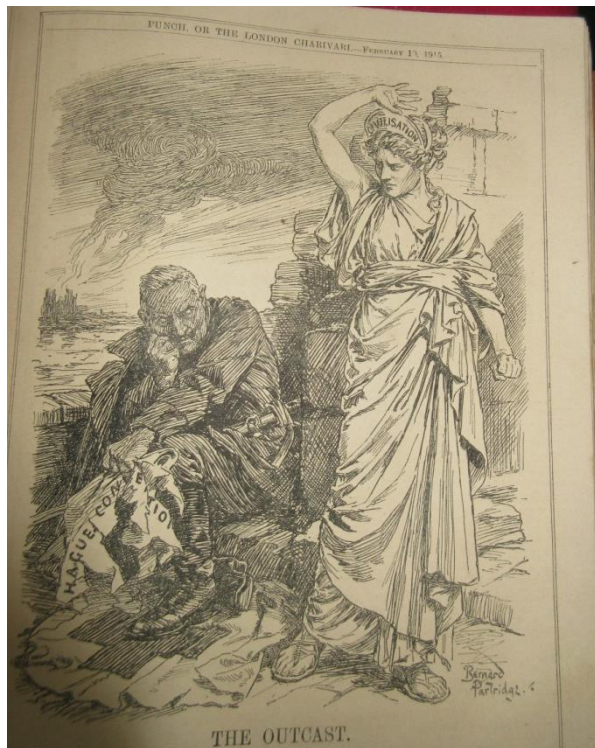


Cartoon- A

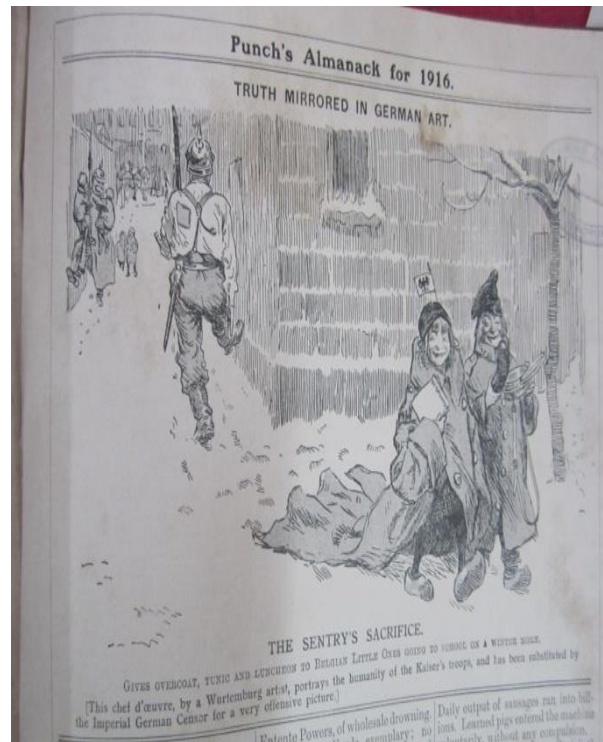


Cartoon - B

2. Cartoons Depicting the European Perception of Germany



Cartoon - C



Cartoon - D

3. Cartoons Depicting German Military Strategy



Cartoon - E



Cartoon - F



Cartoon - G

4. Cartoons Depicting German Leadership



Cartoon - H



Cartoon - I

